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Citation for published version (APA):

Gill, R., & Hansen-Miller, D. (2011). Lad flicks: Discursive reconstructions of masculinity in popular film: Feminism at the movies : understanding gender in contemporary popular cinema. In H. Radner, & E. Pullar (Eds.), *Feminism at the movies : understanding gender in contemporary popular cinema* (pp. 36-50). Routledge.

Citing this paper

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Lad flicks: Discursive reconstructions of masculinity in popular film

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Please cite as Hansen-Miller, D. & Gill, R. (2011) "Lad flicks": Discursive Reconstructions of masculinity in film' in Radner, H. & Stringer, R. (eds.) *Feminism at the Movies*. New York: Routledge

IMPORTANT: When referring to this paper, please check the page numbers in the journal published version and cite these

Hansen-Miller, D. & Gill, R. (2011) "Lad flicks": Discursive Reconstructions of masculinity in film' in Radner, H. & Stringer, R. (eds.) *Feminism at the Movies*. New York: Routledge

'Lad Flicks': Discursive Reconstructions of Masculinity in Popular Film

David Hansen-Miller and Rosalind Gill

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to discuss an emerging genre of films that we call 'lad flicks' or 'lad movies'. Lad flicks can be thought of as a hybrid of 'buddy movies', romantic comedies and 'chick flicks', which centre on the trials and tribulations of a young man or men as they grow up and make their way in the world (usually in North America or the UK). What distinguishes this popular and expanding genre from other coming of age movies, or movies featuring traditional male comic leads, is that masculinity itself is the central object. The source of dramatic tension and humour is the protagonists' struggle with competing definitions of what it means to be a man and their own ability to live up to that category. In what strikes us as a significant shift in popular discourses concerning masculinity, these films are increasingly confident in treating masculinity as an object of humour.

Lad flicks came to prominence in the late 1990s against the backdrop of anxieties about a 'crisis in masculinity', and the proliferation of a number of other 'lad productions' in different sites across popular culture: e.g. radio, television and 'lad magazines'. Unlike other popular forms, however, lad movies have gone relatively unnoticed as a culturally significant genre of films and have received little scholarly attention.

In this chapter, we will set out and analyze dominant features of the genre and focus our discussion on two prominent examples: *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), and *Role Models* (2008). Lad flicks are compelling texts for film theorists as they signal movement away from the subjective pleasures of masculine identification and towards examination of objectified masculinity as a troubled cultural category. While the films deploy classical techniques of scopic pleasure and identification they also fall within more recent trends in popular films and rely heavily on a knowing gaze and irony. As discourse analysts, our interest is to explore 'lad flicks' as historical and culturally specific gendered, racialised, and classed texts, which enunciate distinctive constructions of contemporary masculinity. We are primarily interested in analysing these cultural enunciations in an effort to illuminate contemporary changes in, and understandings of, gender relations in the early 21st century.

Text Box: Some 'Lad Flicks':

Fever Pitch (1997); *Big Daddy* (1999); *High Fidelity* (2000); *About a Boy* (2002); *Old School* (2003); *School of Rock* (2003); *Shaun of the Dead* (2004); *Without a Paddle* (2004); *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (2004); *The Perfect Catch* (2005); *Wedding Crashers* (2005); *Hitch* (2005); *The Forty Year Old Virgin* (2005); *You, Me, and Dupree* (2006); *Failure To Launch* (2006); *Talledega Nights* (2006); *Superbad* (2007); *Knocked Up* (2007); *Walk Hard: The Dewey Cox Story* (2007); *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008); *Drillbit Taylor* (2008); *Zack and Miri Make A Porno* (2008); *Made of Honor* (2008); *Role Models* (2008); *Sex Drive* (2008); *Semi-Pro* (2008); *Step Brothers* (2008); *I Love You, Man* (2009); *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past* (2009)

The chapter is divided into four sections. We start by contextualizing lad flicks within wider social and cultural transformations and the emergence of the figure of the 'new lad'. We then chart the growth of lad flicks and explore some of their generic features. In the following section we consider the films in more detail, focusing on some distinctive features: their constructions of unheroic, fallible masculinities, their structural dependence upon a dynamic of homosociality and homophobia, and (connected to this) the representations of women within the movies. In the final, concluding, section of the chapter we critically interrogate the narrative resolutions offered by the films in which growing up or coming of age is framed in terms of individuated, heterosexual monogamy.

1.The Rise of Laddism

The figure of the 'new lad' has been a feature of popular culture in the UK, US and elsewhere since the early 1990s. He materialised as a new and distinctive articulation of masculinity, across a variety of cultural sites including 'zoo' radio, quiz shows, sitcoms, 'ladvertising' and popular fiction. Primarily, the new lad gained visibility in a new generation of magazines launched (or relaunched) in the mid 1990s. The so-called 'lad mags' moved away from depictions of the egalitarian 'new man', born of feminist demands for equality in the home and workplace, and toward a more 'assertive articulation of the post-permissive masculine heterosexual script' (Nixon, 2001). The new lad was a cultural figure organised around homosocial bonding and predatory and objectifying attitudes towards women. Lad mags offered a hedonistic, apparently shameless, celebration of masculinity, constructed around men's assumed obsessions with drinking, football and (heterosexual) sex.

There have been a variety of attempts to understand the cultural ascendance of the figure of the 'new lad'. Most relate it to ongoing social and economic transformations in post-industrial societies, including the decline of manufacturing and traditionally valued 'male' labouring jobs, the 'downsizing' of management roles through the mergers and acquisitions of the 80's and 90's, the technological displacement of well paid administrative positions, the rise of 'feminized' service sector work, as well as broader associated changes in the position of women (see Gill, 2003). However, these more recent changes constituting the 'new lad' also fall in the line of older discourses concerning perceived threats to men and masculinity.

Michel Foucault (1977, 1978) has explained the manner in which repressive forms of social control were historically displaced by the modern profusion of regulatory, 'bio-political' discourses and their demand for increasing self-discipline. This meant that 'private' spaces such as the family home and the intimate processes of rearing children increasingly became the object of state intervention. Through such processes women were increasingly invested with

forms of social responsibility and authority that were historically reserved for men. As such powers became manifest so did cultural anxieties about the condition of men and masculinity. Signs of such insecurity were apparent as early as the late 19th century when men sought to imaginatively and practically disassociate themselves from the arenas of women's authority – what the historian John Tosh (1999) refers to as 'the flight from domesticity'. The Victorian Era saw a rapid growth in social and sporting clubs where men could escape into all male environs, while the early 20th century saw rising popularity in rugged all male sports such as hunting and fishing (Bederman, 1995).

The 'crisis' in masculinity consistently re-emerged over the 20th century. Barbara Ehrenreich (1987) explores the unexpected success of *Playboy Magazine* in 1954, and the masculine bachelor lifestyle it advocated, by contextualizing it within the demanding conformity of the post-war American corporate world. Men of the era faced considerable pressure towards marriage and family life such that those who resisted could find their sexuality under suspicion. *Playboy* turned the tables by mocking and deriding marriage as an arrangement where parasitic women sapped men's virility. From its start, *Playboy* combined the unapologetic enjoyment of urban consumer culture (fine clothing, the arts, expensive cars) with an unabashedly heterosexual hedonism. As the pages of *Playboy* dripped with sexuality they served to re-signify historically suspect pursuits as prime evidence of manly virility.

The late 1990s saw a proliferation of discourses about boys' poor educational performance relative to girls', young men's increasing 'body anxieties' and associated disorders, as well as general concerns -- amplified by small but vocal men's rights organisations -- that men were becoming the new victims as they lost out to women in divorce courts, workplaces and elsewhere. By the start of the 21st century, the word 'masculinity' was rarely heard unless quickly followed by 'crisis'. As Beynon (2002) put it: "'masculinity" and "crisis" have become so closely associated in some sectors of the media that they are in danger of becoming synonymous. While scholars remain sceptical about the notion of masculinity being in crisis at all (see Beynon, 2002) there is no doubt about the significance of 'crisis talk' in opening up a discursive space in which the figure of the 'new lad' could flourish.

What marks laddism out as distinct from the 'traditional' or 'unreconstructed' versions of masculinity associated with a pre-feminist era, is its self-consciously post-feminist style (Benwell, 2003). 'New laddism' is not ignorant but entirely aware about how it offends against contemporary norms of probity, good taste and 'reasonable' attitudes to women. This is captured in *Loaded* magazine's strapline: 'For men who should know better'. The implication is that they do indeed know better, but take pleasure in not caring. Defiance is melded with a general ethos of 'not taking things too seriously'. More broadly, the affective tone of lad texts is anti-aspirational, smart, detached, ironic, and 'deeply shallow' (Kimmel, 2006). Imelda Whelehan (2000) has argued that the new lad is 'a nostalgic revival of old patriarchy; a direct challenge to feminism's call for social transformation, by reaffirming -- albeit ironically -- the unchanging nature of gender relations and sexual roles' (2000: 5). For others, he is better regarded as a response to the figure of the 'new man', a more caring, sharing and egalitarian

version of masculinity, that achieved a certain media prominence in the 1980s. Ben Crewe (2003) claims that lad culture emerged out of contempt for the 'miserable liberal guilt' of the new man and his 'hesitant and questioning stands on sexual relations'. The new man was condemned as unappealing, narcissistic and above all inauthentic. Against this, lad culture is depicted as libidinous and refreshingly honest.

2.Lad culture goes to the movies

The 'lad flick' emerges and resides within this history as well as collectively indicating ongoing transformations in popular understandings of laddishness and contemporary masculinity. The film's do not simply depict laddishness but meditate upon it. Where the 'chick flick' historically targeted and commercially constituted female audiences through a focus on women and contemporary interpersonal relationships, any parallel cinematic focus on men and interpersonal relationships was traditionally subsumed under the banner of humanistic universality and therefore assumed to hold general relevance, not linked to one gender. For instance, while westerns and war movies drew predominantly male audiences this was not accomplished through an explicit attempt to engage with masculinity as such. A more direct engagement with masculinity did emerge in the 1980's with the popular American 'buddy movie'. Such films often paired black and white men, and therefore marked masculine differences, together for comedic and dramatic effect, as well as a more general cultural renegotiation of racial difference (Wiegman, 1995). The contemporary 'lad flick' combines different genre elements to focus specifically on the interpersonal difficulties facing contemporary masculinity. As we will detail, a predominantly white, entirely heterosexual, and generally lower middle class masculinity emerges as the significant point of crisis within these films.

While early films within the genre wedded humour with elements of melodrama, like the looming threat of Fiona's suicide in *About A Boy* (2002), and so appeared to be sincere about the difficulties of a masculine adulthood, the genre has evolved to suggest that laddishness, new or old, is problematic and unsustainable. Increasingly, the humour of these films derives from what they depict as the juvenile nature of culturally identifiable masculine values and ideals. Further, lad flicks construct those masculine values and ideals as the product of a pathological and anxiety ridden pursuit of collective male approval. The comedic tension rests in the individual male's attempt to live up to or maintain the unrealistic version of masculinity that has been produced by their male peer group. The 'lad' must eventually grow up, overcome their subordination to homosocial values and become a proper adult. However, 'older' more traditional versions of masculinity, such as the stable breadwinner, appear to be foreclosed while historically valued roles marked by fame or heroism are often mocked. Masculinity emerges as a difficult biographical project, as well as a masquerade.

The genre, relatively emergent as it is, is remarkably uniform with a small amount of narrative variation. The writer, director, and producer Judd Apatow, along with a circle of associated writers and actors such as Seth Rogan, Paul Rudd, and Jane Lynch, has come to dominate much of the output. The films generally follow a young (if ageing) white heterosexual male who finds himself in

a situation where he is reluctantly compelled to examine his present lifestyle. Apatow's *The 40-Year Old Virgin* is an extreme but representative example in which Andy Stitzer (Steve Carell) is confronted with the possibility that if he doesn't change he may be a virgin for the rest of his life. Andy is innocently boyish in a number of ways, including his apartment, which is filled with a collection of boy's toys still in their original packaging. Apatow's later film *Role Models* offers a more grounded version of the narrative where, Danny (Paul Rudd), now in his mid thirties is still working the same dead end job that he got fresh out of college. He tours schools promoting 'Minotaur' energy drink with his best friend Wheeler who dresses up as the product mascot. Dumped by his girlfriend, who is tired of his increasingly negative attitude, Danny must change to get her back. Andy and Danny proceed to struggle with the conflicts between the security of their immaturity and the demand to grow up. Notably, it is generally the female love interest who voices the demand for change while the protagonist's male friendship group represents the inclination to resist. Inevitably, the narratives positively resolve themselves when the lead lets go of his self-interest, rejects his foolishness or the foolishness of his male counterparts, and engages adult responsibilities - which are framed almost exclusively in terms of heterosexual domesticity - thus realizing a different level of personal integrity, happiness and fulfilment.

While *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*¹ and *Role Models*, are representative of the genre's dominant tropes there are a range of formulaic variations – some of which are beginning to crystallize as sub-genres. In what we might call 'the Player' variation, (*Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*, *Made of Honor*, *Shallow Hal*, *Wedding Crashers*) a similarly young but ageing, often affluent man who has refused and renounced monogamy is compelled to re-examine his perspective on the matter. In 'the Alpha Male' variation (*Anchorman*, *Semi-Pro*, *Walk Hard*), where the lead is almost exclusively played by Will Farrell, a celebrity figure who selfishly dominates the men and women in his life, must confront his behaviour as circumstances change threatening his happiness and livelihood. Again, in both examples the narcissism is resolved through renewed priorities of heterosexual commitment or parenting. Other examples could be categorized as the 'boys gone wild' variation (*Without A Paddle*, *Old School*) where men who have already assumed domestic responsibility get a chance to regress into boyish excess only to rediscover the value of their prior commitments.

3. Reading lad flicks

3.1 Unheroic Masculinities

Where the figure of the new lad seen in lad magazines and zoo radio arguably offered a defiantly homosocial masculinity as resistance to perceived threats, the lad flick foregrounds the confusion and instability of masculinity as a category. Lad flick male leads' are not heroes, but nor are they anti-heroes. Instead they offer up a depiction of masculinity as fallible, damaged, and distinctly unheroic. In career terms many of the men are floundering, or doing jobs that are tedious and poorly paid. The majority of men within lad flicks are on the bottom edges of a middle class existence, and this classed location of the protagonists is key to

¹ Throughout the rest of the chapter we will refer to *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* as 'Virgin'.

understanding the movies' depictions of unheroic masculinities. The lack of glamour in lower middle or working class lives is emphasized through the aesthetic banality of a more everyday existence than we have come to expect from Hollywood representation. Many of the Apatow films are set in suburban Los Angeles and eschew enviable vistas (e.g. the Hollywood Hills, Malibu) in favour of shopping mall parking lots and familiar chain stores.

In *Virgin*, Andy works in an electronics store (at first without any discernable rank) and lives in a small flat next door to an elderly couple that appear to be his only friends. In *Shaun of the Dead*, Shaun works in a similar store and is verbally humiliated by his teenage colleagues. A few of the films feature characters in danger of falling into lumpen desperation, which is the impetus to reflection and action. In *Zack and Miri Make a Porno*, the eponymous leads struggle to pay the rent in a run down apartment in rustbelt Monroeville, Pennsylvania. Meanwhile, in *School of Rock*, Dewey (Jack Black) sponges off his friend who works as a supply teacher. Significantly, it is his friend's girlfriend (Sarah Silverman) who provides the impetus to Dewey finding work, by threatening to kick him out of their shared flat if he doesn't pay the rent. This gendered dynamic is typical of the genre, in which women are generally represented as attractive, 'together' and relatively successful in contrast to the men. In *Role Models*, for example, Danny's ex-girlfriend Beth (Elizabeth Banks) is a beautiful and successful attorney - a post-feminist heroine combining 'beauty and brains' as Wheeler puts it; in *Virgin*, Trish, Andy's love interest, is a single-parent (and grandparent) who runs her own business.

However, women's working lives are not straightforwardly idealised: Trish struggles with her Ebay store, and other lad flicks show female characters being subject to humiliation or workplace bullying. In *Knocked Up*, Alison's glamorous yet poisonous work environment functions to narratively undercut any presumptive value in career ambitions suggesting that Ben's (Seth Rogan) hedonistic life may not be entirely unreasonable. Female authority figures in *Virgin* and *Role Models* are also ambivalent: Paula (Jane Lynch), the electrical appliance store manager, is depicted as powerful but unstable - an instability the narrative suggests derives from sexual frustration, made evident in her 'inappropriate' attempts to make Andy to her 'fuck-buddy'. Meanwhile Sweeney (Jane Lynch), the leader of the 'Sturdy Wings' mentoring programme in which Danny and Wheeler are engaged (to escape prison) is portrayed as a damaged, capricious evangelist, whose zeal for helping children is an only partially successful displacement of her former addiction to cocaine, funded by her work as a prostitute. These are clearly unflattering depictions of the female boss but unlike the corporate 'ice queens' of an earlier cinematic era [e.g. *Network* (1976), *Working Girl* (1988), *Disclosure* (1994)] these comically unhinged examples of femininity function to underline the male lead's general social subordination rather than to emasculate them, and might be argued to be sympathetic characters.

3.2 Masculinity, Comedy and Trauma

The comic absurdity of a particular version of masculinity is produced by discursively undercutting beliefs, behaviour, and embodiment traditionally valued as masculine. A common trope of 'masculinity training' (*Virgin*, *Hitch*, *Wedding Crashers*, *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*, etc) offers an explicit example of

such strategies. Certain stock scenes are often present: the man will be taught how to flirt and chat up a woman, he will be instructed by his straight friends in the ways of becoming attractive to a woman (something that will often include chest waxing), he will be exhorted by his friends to watch porn, a hooker will be hired for him for the evening -- all of these events will go horribly and humiliatingly wrong, and turn out not to have been what he wanted or what the woman he wanted desired. His 'ordinary', 'nice', unwaxed (read 'authentic') masculinity will be affirmed and in the process his friends (coaches) will also learn similar lessons about themselves. By the end of *Virgin* Andy's male workmates have accepted, in different ways, that their attachments to homosocial definitions of masculinity are making them unhappy. Andy, initially positioned as a figure of derision, ironically becomes a model for the others to follow towards heterosexual monogamy and parenthood.

Such transformations necessarily invite reinterpretations of the hedonistic, pleasurable lifestyles that were supposedly enjoyed by the men. Jay, an African-American character, is depicted as Andy's lead 'coach', embodying an effortless masculinity which makes him highly successful with women, whilst he cheats on his girlfriend. Andy looks to him for advice on how to be 'cool' and how to get laid, and compares himself unfavourably with Jay's assumed-superior black masculinity. Through Jay the film deploys stereotypes of black hyper-masculinity and so produces both a greater comic effect and a more potent challenge to such values when he is also revealed as an unhappy fraud. As Andy comes closer to finally losing his virginity, so the other characters largely repudiate their lifestyles, which are acknowledged caused by some other frailty that they have not until that point acknowledged. When Jay's girlfriend dumps him he fights back the tears as he tells Andy what happened. When Andy asks him why he cheated on her in the first place, Jay bursts out, "Because I'm insecure. You can't tell?!" A more subtle example of this racial deployment is to be found in *Hitch*, in which black urban sophisticate Will Smith plays life and relationship coach to a hapless Albert (Kevin James) -- yet in which the tables turn in favour of Albert's own authentic individuality by the end of the film.²

'The Player' variation offers a different example of traditionally valued masculine behaviour being undercut by the imperative of individual authenticity. Within this subgenre masculinity is less a humiliation as it is trauma that one bears. Often confident, often rich and living a seemingly enviable life of parties and casual sex with beautiful women the traditional playboy protagonist's life is generally revealed to be the result of a psychic wound. In *Ghosts of Girlfriends Past*, Connor Mead (Mathew McConaughey) comes to understand that the lifestyle he thought he was happy with all roots from witnessing his childhood best friend and first love, the girl who helped him through the period of his parent's death, share her first kiss with someone else. Connor's refusal of monogamy and success in the realm of sexual conquest is actually a highly practiced defence against this difficult memory. So practiced, in fact, that he has forgotten the original event. In *Shallow Hal*, Hal's (Jack Black)

² Race is central to lad flicks in a way that we have not been able to discuss as fully as we would like. *Virgin*, for example, offers up a range of racial stereotypes for humorous effect, centred on the fraught relationship between Mooj, Haziz and Jay, the three black characters who work at the store.

sexual pursuit of idealized beauty in women, regardless of their personality, roots back to the trauma of witnessing his religious father's delirious death bed rambling where he insists that Hal understand that life is really all about "Hot young tail." In the mode of Freud's early analysis of hysterical young women, Hal, comically, has no memory of the traumatic scene that is the cause of his obsession, which is also marked by elements of delusion about his own attractiveness. In both cases the value of sexual virility is externally imposed upon an emotionally vulnerable boy and the imposition causes each of them significant problems. In both cases the manifest voices of masculine knowledge and authority are patently unreliable as the characters are, to the audience, clearly unhappy or simply delirious.

3.3 The Queer Limits of Lad Flick Masculinity

One of the striking features of lad flicks is their dependence upon dynamics of intense heterosexual male bonding, paired with explicit homophobic humour. This connection between homosociality and homophobia is not incidental or innocent but constitutes a structuring feature of the films. Homophobic humor consistently serves to disavow and deflect the homoerotic potential among the characters or between male audiences and those on screen. The use of humour for this purpose in cinema is well documented (Dyer, 1982; Neale, 1993) alongside other standard 'devices' such as the presence of an attractive woman to 'reassure' viewers of the protagonists' heterosexuality. However, instances of homophobic humor in the films invite further analysis as they become remarkable for their intensity -- which give the films an almost hysterical feel -- and their heavily ironised status.

Early scenes in '*Virgin*' are indicative of the slippages and confusion within such narratives. From the beginning Andy's unrealized and un-matured heterosexual masculinity parallels historical stereotypes of gay men as fastidious or sissies. Before discovering the secret of Andy's virginity his workmates first speculate that he may be gay. That is 'cool', Jay states, as he even 'has friends who fuck guys....in jail'. The notion of being 'cool with gays' taps into a general comedic trend, used, for example, by writers on the popular US TV series '*Seinfeld*' and '*Friends*', which plays with anxieties about both homosexuality and homophobia, as well as intertextually/ironically referencing a long tradition of homophobic stand-up. Each of these shows featured episodes in which a disavowal of homosexuality was immediately (and repeatedly) followed by a disavowal of homophobia: 'I'm not gay... not that there's anything wrong with that'. This might be seen as evidence of more liberal or progressive views on sexuality, or, contrastingly, as a modernised, more knowing and pernicious form of heterosexism, a new way of 'doing homophobia' that parallels shifts in the ways in which racism and sexism are practised.

It is later in *Virgin*, in an exchange between David and Cal as they debate the virtues of celibacy, that we see the clearest example of what we argue is the simultaneous enactment and mocking of homophobia. Over a duration of several minutes the pair trade barbs using the formulation 'you know how I know you're gay' (because: 'you like Coldplay', 'you like the movie *Maid in Manhattan*', 'you macraméd yourself a pair of jean shorts', etc etc...), intercut with shots of the videogame they play, in which two muscled, half naked men do battle. In this

prolonged sequence, homophobic insults are both traded and ironised, while the filming also seems to be drawing mocking attention to the cinematic conventions discussed above. The 'irony' derives from the manner in which such jokes are seemingly less direct attacks upon an existent sexual minority than they are self-deprecating jokes about the homosexual potentials of heterosexual men. In this way, lad flicks acknowledge the idea that men who are homophobic harbour unconscious fears about being gay, while nonetheless leaving the denigrated status of homosexuality completely intact.

The homophobic construction of male homosociality is somewhat more apparent in *Role Models*. While there is no significant intimation that Augie (Christopher Mintz-Plasse), - Danny's 'little' within 'Sturdy Wings' - may be gay, Augie's degradation at the hands of his uncaring parents is underlined by his willing submission to the mincing, gay, adult 'King Argotron' (Ken Jeon) within his male dominated fantasy role play subculture.³ Further, Augie's relative lack of sexual development is counter-posed to the younger and sexually precocious Ronnie (another deployment of stereotyped black hyper-masculinity), who is Wheeler's 'little'. King Argotron seems incapable of distinguishing fantasy from reality while scheming and cheating in an effort to maintain his juvenile and fictional authority. The abject figure of the king explicitly unites immaturity and homosexuality as potential psychic danger that can be defeated with the help of positive heterosexual role models- which is to say, men who take up their parental responsibilities. Through Danny's influence and help, Augie defeats Argotron and gains the confidence to talk to the girl that he has admired from a distance. Rather plainly, just as Danny must overcome his own juvenile attachments to realize his relationship with Beth, so must Augie overcome his juvenile attachments to realize his emerging heterosexual identity.

4. Conclusion: Having it all ways? Masculinity, Ambivalence and Melancholia

How, then, might we read lad flicks as contemporary filmic articulations of masculinity? We want to suggest that they are multiply ambivalent texts. They are at once self evidently sexist, racist and homophobic, yet they also constitute reflections on gender, race and homosocial relations. Moreover, they seem to problematize the aggressive laddism of other productions. In one regard, lad flicks might be read as a positive development in the discursive evolution of masculinity in that they move away from the homosocial defiance found in earlier forms of laddism. If the new lad reactively resisted the perceived rise of feminine authority, then these films may suggest such anxieties are in the process of being assuaged. The implicit resolution of many of these movies seems to be that masculine hedonism and self-interest and feminine self-sacrifice and responsibility temper each other, in turn producing a modern mode of potentially egalitarian adulthood. There may be a temporal dimension to consider here too: if the new lad magazines that were so popular in the 90's were targeted at men in their twenties, these films, which often represent men in their thirties, indicate the same generation's need to rethink earlier forms of social and cultural defensiveness.

³It is hard to ignore that the character of Argotron, an Asian-American male, may also rely upon historical racial stereotypes where Asian men are figured as less masculine than black or white men.

Yet alongside this optimistic reading it is important to highlight the profound conservatism of lad flicks' resolutions in which 'coming-of-age' is figured exclusively in heteronormative terms, to the extent, indeed, that adulthood itself is presented as synonymous with heterosexual monogamy (and sometimes parenthood). In an almost fairytale-like manner the 'patriarchal dividend' that Connell (1996) argues benefits all men, appears magically to accrue to some protagonists when they renounce their laddish ways and take up their 'proper' place in the heteronormative order. In *Virgin*, for example, when Andy starts dating Trish he is suddenly promoted at work -- a narrative development that seems to bear no relationship to his strengths as an employee. Meanwhile when Andy and Trish get married, he is rewarded with his own business.

In a sense, then, lad flicks offer a compelling 'invitation' to men to 'put aside childish things' and join the adult heterosexual world. But the films are, it seems to us, ambivalent about this. Whilst the narrative resolutions might suggest one kind of reading (as above), this would appear reductive given the gleeful celebration of laddish pursuits depicted throughout the films. These activities include a whole array of 'juvenile' behaviours, but primarily centre on the enjoyment/use of women for sexual pleasure. The depiction of men's pursuits are clearly central to the pleasures offered by lad flicks, a fact that is underscored by reviews, and by the quotes prominently displayed in promotion of the movies which emphasise the enjoyable hilariousness of male bad behaviour. *Role Models*' UK advertising poster, for example, featured the tag-line 'Bad behaviour. Bad attitude. Bad example' followed by a single quote: 'Laugh-out loud'. To highlight this is to acknowledge the fact that the pleasures of hedonistic laddism are not entirely resignified through the narrative closure of the individualised heterosexual monogamy resolution. It returns us to the ambivalence discussed earlier in relation to the films' homophobia; like this, we suggest, it requires a reading that can see both the celebration and the repudiation of laddism within these films.

Such a reading is supported furthermore by the fact that not all lad flicks protagonists do 'grow up' and settle down in the prescribed manner. In *Role Models*, for example, whilst Danny takes this path, Wheeler happily continues his promiscuous lifestyle. Indeed, it might even be argued that Wheeler succeeded where others had failed in mentoring Ronnie because he was able to bond with Ronnie -- in classic homosocial fashion -- through shared interests in 'boobies' and 'pussy'. Moreover, Wheeler was partly motivated by the fact that Ronnie's mother was 'hot'. Wheeler, in other words, might be said to remain -- unapologetically, if not defiantly -- a 'lad'.

The ambivalent nature of the resolutions is also evidence in the sense of melancholy and loss that accompanies them. The derided forms of masculinity may be synonymous with irresponsibility but they are also narratively coded as boyish playfulness. To become a modern man one has to abnegate attachments to play or subordinate them to the play of children. In '*Virgin*', Andy's unopened toys not only suggest an unrealized manhood, they also suggest a thwarted boyhood. With the help of his new girlfriend he decides to sell them on Ebay and there is a funny but poignant scene where he struggles to let go, saying goodbye to the different action figures as he packs them up for shipping. Similarly, while

Danny is clearly miserable in the job that once gave him pleasure, he does still drive around in a toy truck and remains friends Wheeler. Danny's resistance to the demands of his girlfriend and his bitterness about life in general arguably start to crystallize as disappointment about declining opportunities for satisfying play. This becomes explicit as Danny contends with Augie through his forced participation in the program for disadvantaged children. Danny's realizes the fulfilment offered by adult responsibility in selflessly playing with Augie and embracing his embarrassing role-play subculture.

Judith Butler's (1997) understanding of the relationship between melancholia and heterosexual gender is instructive and can tell us more about the narrative of sacrifice and loss. For Butler, a strictly heteronormative society demands that heterosexual people must renounce their passionate attachments to the same gender. For instance while a boy's love for his mother is meant to be transferred and resolved in his eventual mature sexual attachment to a girlfriend, his similar love for his father cannot safely be transferred to other men. For Butler, Gay men and Lesbians cannot help but be aware of this process as a homophobic culture demands heterosexual attachments from all adults. While Gays and Lesbians mourn opposite sex attachments through the coming out process, heterosexuals are not allowed to mourn the loss of their same sex attachments and the failure to mourn results in melancholia. Lad flicks demonstrate confused longing for the homosocial culture that mature heterosexual men must apparently leave behind. We could interpret this as melancholia concerning the passionate male friendships that, once confronted with the heterosexual imperatives of adulthood, can no longer be sustained without suspicion. *Role Models* can be understood in terms of the conflict Danny experiences between his love for Wheeler and his love for Beth. He struggles to and ultimately succeeds in transferring his boyish attachment to Wheeler to a more acceptable mentoring (which is to say 'parental') relationship with Augie. Similarly, as Wheeler loses Danny to Beth he transfers his own affections to the more acceptable mentoring of Ronnie. Notably, *Role Models* concludes with a humorously sentimental scene where Danny, surrounded by the costumed role play characters, sings a sentimental Broadway style solo to Beth, while the narrative conclusions of 'Virgin' are followed with a camp rendition of 'Aquarius' from the counter-cultural, sixties era musical *Hair*. Such endings seem to confess to the lack of satisfaction implicit in the conclusion at the same time that they curiously restore the spectre of gay cultural sensibilities, or perhaps lament the optimism and aspirations for social change associated with 'the sixties'.

Rather than a positive resolution of the conflicts that accrue to contemporary masculinity it is perhaps more appropriate to see lad flicks as a particular and socially located negotiation of conservative values. Where an earlier generation of working class and middle class men may have been able to rely on their wives to take up 'the second shift' (Hochschild, 1990) of domestic responsibilities and so continued to enjoy the all male environs of after work socialization, economic and social changes appear to demand that the lad choose between the two. The movement from the defiant codes of 'new laddism' to the lad flick's reluctant acceptance of domestication marks a significant shift but one that ultimately leaves the fundamental problem intact. For the lad, some version of traditional masculine power and authority is necessary and alternative sources of personal

validation are generally foreclosed. Further, no forms of political engagement with the problem are anywhere to be found much less taken seriously. While the lad let's go of his need to live up to traditional and homosocial standards of masculinity he seems to only re-emerge within the not so clearly pleasurable confines of the nuclear family.

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